

Did Watergate plumbers deep-six JFK?

Burglars tied to exiled Cubans with 'means and opportunity' to kill president

By Jack Colhoun

Washington—On June 23, 1972, six days after the Watergate break-in, then-President Richard Nixon told White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman to get the CIA to squelch the FBI's investigation because it would "open up the whole Bay of Pigs thing again."

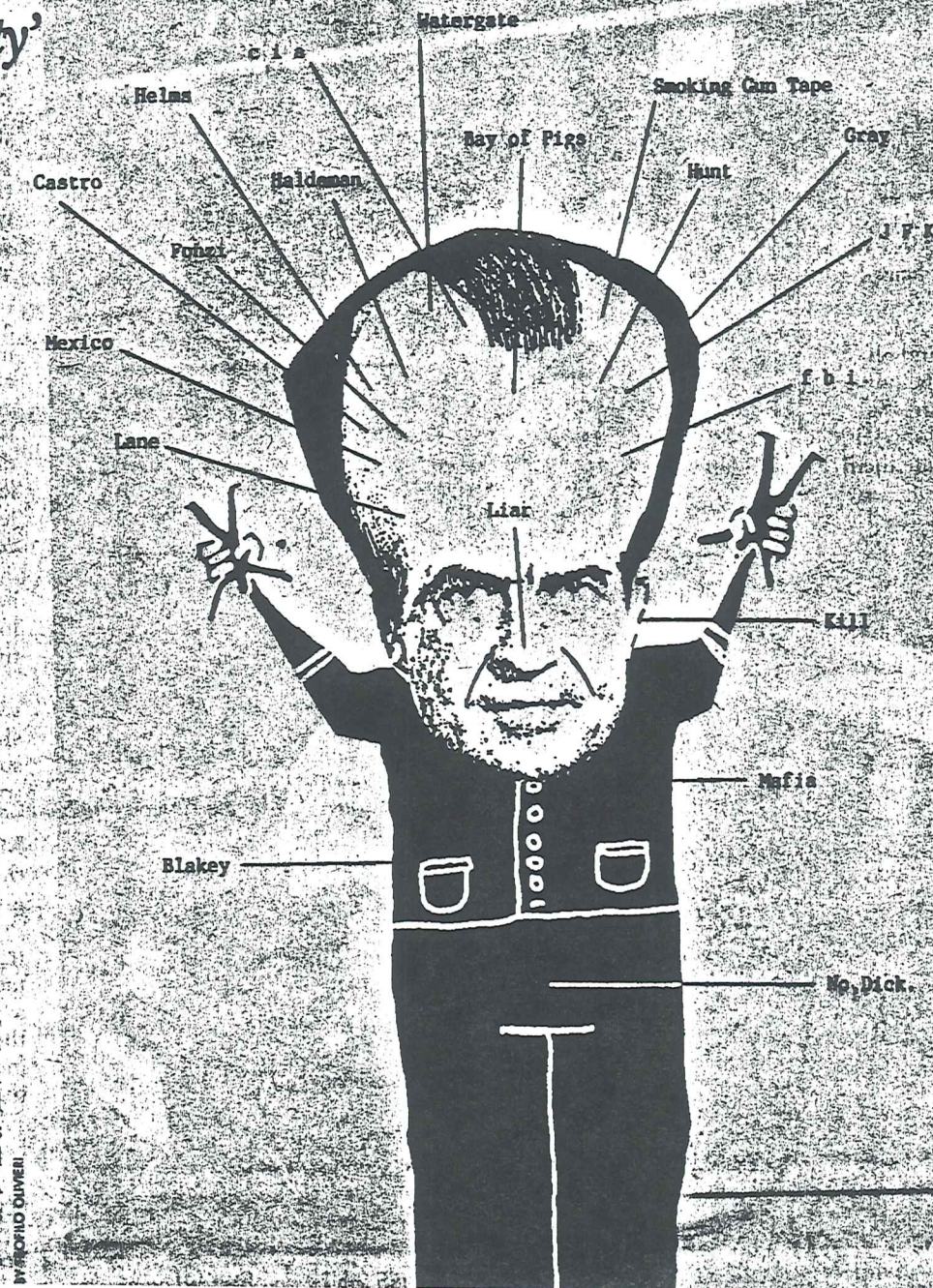
The tape of that conversation was the "smoking gun" that helped bring Nixon down in 1974, persuading even his hard-core supporters that he was guilty.

But the full implications of Nixon's instructions to Haldeman to blackmail CIA Director Richard Helms—over the Watergate burglars' links to anti-Castro covert actions and possibly to the assassination of President John Kennedy—were never explored.

Nixon wanted Helms to tell Acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray to back off his investigation because it would expose an ongoing CIA covert operation in Mexico. He believed Helms would cooperate if Haldeman mentioned E. Howard Hunt, the CIA operative who supervised the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate apartment and office complex here.

Hunt and the five burglars arrested—Bernard Barker, Virgilio González, Eugenio Martínez, James McCord and Frank Sturgis—were all tied to the CIA and right-wing Cuban exile guerrilla raids against Cuba. Hunt had coordinated guerrilla raids against Cuba for the CIA before the agency's failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961.

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decided not to investigate Cuban exiles' possible role in the Kennedy assassination "despite the urging of staff counsel involved with that evidence and the apparent fact that anti-Castro Cuban exiles had the means, motivation and opportunity to be involved in the assassination."

'Embroidered' trip to Dallas?

The story of Marita Lorenz has also been cited by some as evidence of a CIA anti-Castro Cuban exile link to the Kennedy assassination.

Lorenz, who had an affair with Castro in 1959, says she was recruited by the CIA and instructed to rekindle her romance with the Cuban leader in order to get close enough to kill him. She allegedly put poison pills in his drinks, but the plot failed and she was extracted from Cuba by the agency. Back in Miami, she worked with Sturgis and other anti-Castro Cuban exiles.

Attorney Mark Lane put Lorenz on the witness stand in a 1985 trial in which Lane successfully appealed a libel judgment against the right-wing, anti-Semitic Liberty Lobby in a suit brought by Howard Hunt. Hunt had charged that former CIA agent Victor Marchetti libeled him in an article published by the Liberty Lobby newspaper "Spotlight," which stated that Hunt was in Dallas, Tex., on Nov. 22, 1963, the day Kennedy was shot. Hunt maintains that he wasn't in Dallas that day and was not involved in the assassination.

Lorenz's testimony was the high point of Lane's case. She told the jury that she and Frank Sturgis traveled from a CIA safe house in Miami to Dallas in November 1963 in a two-car caravan loaded with guns. She testified Hunt met them when they arrived in Dallas that Nov. 21.

"There was a pre-arranged meeting that E. Howard Hunt delivered us sum of money for the so-called operation that I did not know its nature," Lorenz stated. She said she and Sturgis worked for the CIA in 1963 and that Hunt was Sturgis

right-wing Cuban exile groups against Cuba. Hunt had coordinated guerrilla raids against Cuba for the CIA before the agency's failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961.

"Hunt ... will uncover a lot of things," Nixon continued. "You open that scab, there's a hell of a lot of things ... tell them we just feel that it would be very detrimental to have this thing go any further. This involves these Cubans, Hunt and a lot of hanky-panky that we have nothing to do with ourselves," adding, "We protected Helms from one hell of a lot of things."

Just moments before Haldeman's meeting with Helms and Deputy CIA Director Vernon Walters, Nixon reiterated the point: "Tell them that if it gets out, it's going to make the CIA look bad, it's going to make Hunt look bad, and it's likely to blow the whole Bay of Pigs, which we think would be very unfortunate for the CIA."

Sinister force

"The 'smoking gun' conversation is mysterious and also very sinister," Jim Hougan, author of "Secret Agenda: Watergate, Deep Throat and the CIA," told the Guardian.

Hougan doesn't think that Nixon was "whistling in the dark when he raised the specter of the Bay of Pigs and possibly the Kennedy assassination." In the Eisenhower administration, he points out, "Nixon was the action officer for the White House on the Bay of Pigs. So it's not as if he didn't know whereof he spoke. His threats to the agency via Haldeman, therefore, were well informed and would have been taken seriously by Helms, although I'm not sure exactly what the nature of the threat was."

Helms reacted to Nixon's message, wrote Haldeman in his memoirs, "The Ends of Power," by "gripping the arms of his chair, leaning forward and shouting, 'The Bay of Pigs had nothing to do with this. I have no concern about the Bay of Pigs.'"

"I just sat there," Haldeman wrote. "I was absolutely shocked by Helms' violent

reaction. Again, I wondered, what was such dynamite in the Bay of Pigs story."

Later in the book, Haldeman wrote that it seemed "in all of those Nixon references to the Bay of Pigs, he was actually referring to the Kennedy assassination."

Haldeman reasoned that Helms was vulnerable to political blackmail because he withheld information about the CIA and Mafia's joint efforts to kill Cuban leader Fidel Castro during Warren Commission hearings in 1963-64. Helms, the CIA's liaison with the Warren Commission, was also at the time the agency's deputy director for plans, in charge of covert operations.

"No mention of the Castro assassination attempt was made to the Warren Commission by CIA representatives," Haldeman wrote.

The attempts on Castro's life were not made public until the investigation of the CIA by Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho, in the mid-1970s.

"When Nixon said, 'It's likely to blow the whole Bay of Pigs,'" Haldeman speculated, "he might have been reminding Helms, not so gently, of the cover-up of the CIA assassination attempts on the hero of the Bay of Pigs, Fidel Castro—a CIA operation that may have triggered the Kennedy tragedy and which Helms desperately wanted to hide."

Gaeton Fonzi, who served as an investigator in the late 1970s on the House Select Committee on Assassinations, rejects Haldeman's implied contention that Castro ordered Kennedy killed.

"I think that's the most remote of the assassination theories," Fonzi told the Guardian. He said the committee found

no evidence that the attempts to kill Castro provoked him to retaliate by having Kennedy assassinated.

Fonzi noted if Castro had Kennedy killed, it would have exposed Cuba to the threat of an all-out U.S. invasion. At the time of the assassination, he said, Kennedy's administration was engaged in indirect talks with Castro to explore increasing diplomatic relations, and Castro knew that then-Vice President Lyndon Johnson was more likely to take a hard line against Cuba.

Fonzi called Helms' failure to tell the Warren Commission about the CIA-Mafia assassination attempts against Castro "outrageous." He added that if the commission knew of those attempts, it might have opened new lines of inquiry. He pointed out that Helms supervised the agency's secret war against Cuba from CIA headquarters in Langley, Va.

"The anti-Castro Cuban exiles and the CIA operatives, who ran them, had the motivation to kill Kennedy," Fonzi, an expert on anti-Castro Cuban groups, told the Guardian.

In the agreement Kennedy worked out with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to defuse the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, he promised that the United States would stop the anti-Castro exiles' CIA-backed guerrilla raids on the island and close down their military camps in the United States. That, Fonzi says, "was proof to the Cuban exiles and the CIA agents that Kennedy was a traitor." Some of them even thought Kennedy was a "Russian agent."

In the House committee's 1979 report, Fonzi wrote that the Warren Commission

"There was a pre-arranged meeting that E. Howard Hunt delivered us sums of money for the so-called operation that I did not know its nature," Lorenz stated. She said she and Sturgis worked for the CIA in 1963 and that Hunt was Sturgis' CIA paymaster.

In "Plausible Denial: Was the CIA Involved in the Assassination of JFK?" Lane wrote that Lorenz was "very reluctant" to say who else was on that trip.

"They killed Kennedy. I don't want to be the one to give their names; it's too dangerous," he says she told him.

In response to questioning by Hunt's attorney during the trial, Lorenz said Jerry Patrick Hemming, the Novo brothers and Pedro Diaz Lanz also took part in the car caravan.

Fonzi, who discovered Lorenz and uncovered her connection to Sturgis, doesn't consider her story "credible."

He says he found her believable when he first interrogated her for the House Assassination Committee, but says she "embroidered" her story later after she learned he was investigating the Kennedy assassination.

But Fonzi doesn't rule out the possibility that the CIA and anti-Castro Cuban exiles were tied to the assassination in some manner.

"The kinds of questions you are raising about the [smoking gun] conversation—whether Nixon actually meant Kennedy's assassination when he said Bay of Pigs—are legitimate questions that should have been delved into by the committee," Fonzi told the Guardian. "But the committee's priority wasn't to find the truth. Bob Blakey's priority was to complete a report on time and within the budget provided by Congress. Blakey was the chief counsel of the committee."

"After all these years, we still haven't had a total and complete investigation of the Kennedy assassination," Fonzi added. "That's an outrage for a supposedly democratic and open society."